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ABSTRACT

A study was done of recent district-initiated reform movements by analyzing different belief systems regarding schools and reform and by applying the analysis to a study of a district widely known for its leading role in implementing reforms. Belief System I is consistent with traditional organizational theory and top-down management. Belief System II sees reform as an internal process within each school with principals as genuine instructional leaders. This study of a southern urban school district explored the effect of teachers' involvement in decision making using a model of participation derived from the restructuring, school effectiveness, and participation literature. School teachers were administered a 19-item questionnaire. Findings were inconsistent with predictions of the restructuring movement; teachers were not as involved in decision making as they wanted to be. Analyses of the findings in light of the belief systems indicate that elaborate reform programs with an attendant set of rules and regulations will fail if the purpose of schooling (to have teachers educate children) is overlooked. Nevertheless, reform agendas consistently overlook the importance of teachers' work in the classroom, concentrating instead on supposedly more professional tasks outside the classroom. Includes 30 references. (JB)

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Limitations of District Initiated Reform: A Study of a Major Urban Reform Initiative

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Running head: Limitations of District Reform

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Despite optimistic predictions that hailed the initiation of the restructuring movement, little has ensued of a substantive nature that measures up to expectations (Popkewitz & Lind, 1989; Smylie & Denny, 1990). The lack of discernable change was captured by Wohlstetter and Odden (1992) who write with regard to school based management that it seems to be "everywhere and nowhere" (p. 531). Similarly, Popkewitz and Lind (1989) note that restructuring initiatives frequently have the dual effects of further standardizing teachers' work and increasing "bureaucratic structures [in a way]...that reduce[s] teacher autonomy" (p. 591). Tye (1992) echos this concern, noting that "just when the restructuring movement is calling for more decision-making authority to be invested at the school level, the reality is that educational decision making is more 'top down' and hierarchical than it has ever been" (p. 11).

There is a lesson to be learned from these experiences with restructuring that is identical to lessons taught, but not learned, from previous reform efforts. That lesson is that schools and the people in them do not respond well to externally mandated, superficial, disconnected initiatives that regard as unimportant the fundamental function of schooling (i.e, teachers' academic work with students) and are insensitive to the beliefs, concerns, and priorities of those for whom the initiatives are intended.

The present paper suggests that one reason why school reform efforts almost unerringly fail is that despite the terminology adopted to describe reform initiatives, the proposals continue to

be rooted in traditional organization theory where rules and regulations triumph over innovation and creativity. In light of this phenomenon, the paper further suggests that restructuring should be reframed so that reforms match original restructuring proposals (e.g., The Carnegie Report) on matters of vesting authority and autonomy in school based professionals. The paper goes a step further, however, to argue that the focus of these reforms should be enhancing the teacher-student interaction in pursuit of students' scholastic growth.

To argue our point, we provide a brief history of the past 30 years of school reform before presenting two belief systems, each of which provides a lens for viewing reform efforts. Using both lenses, data from an earlier study of a major restructuring effort is reconsidered and recommendations for future initiatives are made. It is worth noting at this point that reframing reform to match the initial proposals is no guarantee that the hoped for improvements will be realized, for this premise remains largely untested. However, given the dismal results that six years of restructuring has brought, it seems foolhardy not to return to the suggestions of the original works and to refocus the reform agenda so that enhancing teachers' work with students becomes central.

Historical Overview

For the past three decades, education in the United States has been in the spotlight of one or another reform movement. In the mid-1960s, the Great Society legislation of the Johnson presidency dedicated millions of dollars to education programs designed to

improve the quality of education available to indigent children. These federal efforts did not reverse underachievement in the targeted population (Lytle, 1992); indeed, much has been written about a general decline of test scores that began during that time (e.g., Bennett, 1988).

In response to the meager results of the Great Society programs, a back-to-basics movement emerged at the state level in the 1970s. Associated with this reform agenda were state laws and local policies which set minimum standards for student promotion, specified minutes of instruction per subject, and issued step-by-step curriculum mandates that "teacher-proofed" the curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 1988). According to Tye (1992), "school districts...responded by becoming more bureaucratic...[using]...the compliance issue to strengthen their own positions with regard to decision making" (p. 11). As a result of these changes, minimums became maximums, and student outcomes failed to improve (Elmore, 1987; Goodlad, 1984).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published A Nation at Risk. The effect of this document and the media attention that surrounded it was to intensify outside control of the classroom and to ignite political concern about education. In the wake that followed, over 700 state laws affecting education were passed (Timar & Kirp, 1989). Most often these legislated reforms were mechanical in nature (Murphy, 1991) and assumed that doing more of the same and doing it longer was synonymous with doing it better.

More rigorous standards for both grade school promotion and high school graduation were part of this body of legislation, as was an increase in the importance accorded to standardized test results. While teachers found opportunities for career advancement as part of these reforms, these opportunities were tied to criteria established by statewide merit pay plans and evaluation schemes. Teachers in some instances reported that these programs required a great deal of extra work with little or no benefit accruing to activities in the classroom (Rosenholtz, 1987).

The current restructuring movement was born in the mid-1980s as a response to the earlier efforts of that decade. Original restructuring proposals such as the Carnegie Report call for a radical departure from the past practices and a thorough revamping of education. Advocates proposed a realignment of power, with professionals in schools driving the system rather than the reverse. Through school based management and shared decision making, educators in schools were to gain authority to decide, on a school-by-school basis, how to meet state and district goals for student progress, including deciding issues of curriculum and pedagogy. Closely related to school based management and shared decision making are the concepts of teacher empowerment and professionalization, which again, were calls to increase the authority of those who do the central work of education, the teachers. Although devolving authority to the school level is a prominent feature of the original reform reports, Wohlstetter and Odden (1992) note that it has rarely occurred in practice.

Reform Efforts and Belief Systems

Consistent with the top-down/bottom-up debate that has surrounded current discussions of reform, change efforts can be classified according to two belief systems regarding schools. Belief System I, the dominant system, is consistent with traditional organizational theory and top-down management. Through the lens of Belief System I, schools are viewed as malleable and easily manipulated by experts and policymakers. From this perspective, reform is embodied in a set of strategic initiatives promulgated by policymakers to enable central office administrators to control and regulate schools through curriculum, testing, and teacher evaluation. Most significant reform efforts of the last 30 years are rooted in this belief system, including many reforms begun under the mantle of restructuring (e.g., Popkewitz & Lind, 1989; Smylie & Denny, 1990; Taylor & Bogotch, 1992).

We suggest that there is a more useful belief system that not only breaks with tradition, but moves beyond the original restructuring reports, as well. Through the lens of Belief System II, school change is reframed so that attention is directed to the teacher-student interaction in the learning process. Belief System II posits that expertise is not vested exclusively in those outside the school, but also exists with those in the school. When viewed through this second lens, pedagogical techniques that enable students to learn how to learn and to enjoy the process become more important than the particulars of curriculum.

This belief system requires a merging of talents between those

typically considered to be at the top, that is, in central office, and those in the schools. However, the emphasis is changed. Central office efforts in the area of teacher evaluation lose relevance to offering schools technical assistance and staff training developed in response to needs identified by teachers. The matter of testing no longer is used as a way of separating the successful from the unsuccessful, but instead as a way to diagnose student progress and to modify where necessary. And, support for teachers in a continuing quest to provide more worthwhile learning experiences for children supplants the bureaucratic "focus on rules and regulations...[that] stifle initiative" (Timar & Kirp, 1987, p. 309).

Differing sets of assumptions about schools and the people associated with them attend these two opposing belief systems. Because assumptions regarding both the process and products of change shape the formulation of reform plans and the way in which these plans are implemented, knowing what the assumptions are is important.

Basic to any change effort is the assumption that something needs fixing. This assumption is common to both belief systems. Also common to each are assumptions about the outcomes expected to follow implementation. These outcomes include dramatically improved student performance, reduction in drop-out and misbehavior rates, increased teacher job satisfaction, and finally, evidence of community satisfaction and support for the schools.

While expectations about product are similar in the two belief

systems, assumptions about process differ. Those who ascribe to Belief System I, assert that strategic initiatives will reform schools, and seek means to identify teachers who match criteria established by experts as defining well-qualified or excellent teachers. These criteria are typically embodied in teacher testing or evaluation programs. The role of teachers is to implement the mandated curriculum, and thereby produce evidence of student learning through rising test scores.

Principals working under this belief system manage the school, as opposed to leading it, and often spend great portions of their time dealing with student discipline and completing paperwork to document compliance with various programs. Though the title 'instructional leader' has been apportioned to principals through reforms stemming from Belief System I, principals often find it difficult to allocate time for observing teachers, much less for engaging in instructing students themselves or facilitating dialogue among teachers regarding the academic program and student progress. Central office professionals, not unlike principals, take on the job of monitoring compliance and ensuring that standard operating procedures are followed.

Those who believe that strategic initiatives are fundamental to reforming schools, are mindful that parents are important. Hence parent representatives are typically appointed to school and district advisory committees. Research indicates, however, that these representatives seldom influence decisions (Zeichner, 1991).

A different set of assumptions undergirds Belief System II.

Because reform is seen as an internal process within each school, trappings of teacher excellence are eschewed in favor of engaging teachers in serious thought and discussion about instruction and curriculum and the needs of students. Efforts are not focused so much on test scores as on teaching students <u>how</u> to learn, on fostering positive attitudes toward learning, and on the production of evidence that important concepts have been mastered (Sizer, 1986). As Levin (in Brandt, 1992) notes, "most of us wouldn't be satisfied if our kids were in the 95th percentile but coming home from school bored and not being challenged" (p. 22).

The principal in such schools <u>is</u> an instructional leader, facilitating dialogue, supporting experimentation with new pedagogy, and assuming teaching responsibilities. Under this belief system, the relationship between the school and central office is altered, with central office professionals supporting, not monitoring, the work done in schools. Parents are not incidental to the process under Belief System II, but are integrally a part of the dialogue of continuous school renewal and student learning.

One aim of the present study is to move from a theoretical discussion of belief systems regarding schools and reform to an empirically based analysis. To do so, an overview is presented of a study conducted in a district widely known for its leading role in implementing reforms designed to be responsive to the restructuring literature.

The Study

To determine the effect of teachers' involvement in decision making, a study was conducted which tested a model of participation derived from the restructuring, school effectiveness, and participation literatures (see Taylor & Bogotch, 1992 for more thorough results). The model linked teacher participation in decision making to six teacher and student outcomes; teacher job satisfaction, their choice of instructional techniques, teacher and student attendance, and student achievement and behavior.

Method

Sample. The study took place in a large, urban district in the south that is widely known for it innovative reform programs. Of the 250-plus schools in the district, 53 applied for involvement in the restructuring program, and 32 were selected as pilots (Gomez, 1989). The sample included regular education teachers in some of the elementary and high schools which were pilots in a school based management/shared decision making program developed and supported by both the district and the union. In the study, an attempt was made to pair each pilot school with a non-pilot school that matched on three variables, organizational level, student body size, and percent of students on free lunch. Although there was difficulty in obtaining a sample, 24 of the 32 schools in the study matched.

To determine the effect of sampling bias, certain demographic characteristics (gender, ethnicity, and educational level) of teachers who agreed to participate were compared with schoolwide

profiles. Since the profiles of the actual respondents matched the population profiles very closely, the samples at each school were considered reasonably representative.

Instrumentation. The study has both quantitative and qualitative components. A 19 item questionnaire developed by Bacharach, Bauer, and Shedd (1986) was used to measure teachers' participation in decision making. To assess teacher job satisfaction, the Job Descriptive Index (Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969 [JDI]) was used. The JDI measures job satisfaction through several subscales, including present work, promotion, and coworkers. Data on attendance, achievement, and behavior were obtained from school-by-school profiles published by the district's central office. To determine teachers' choice of instructional techniques, an observation protocol developed by Teddlie, Kirby, and Stringfield (1989) was modified and used to focus the observations. Additional qualitative data were collected through short, unstructured interviews with 21 of the teachers observed.

Summary of Findings

The findings which emerged from this study are inconsistent with predictions of the restructuring movement. For example, teachers indicated that they were <u>not</u> as involved in decision making as they wanted to be. The smallest discrepancy between teachers' <u>desire</u> for participation and their <u>rate</u> of participation concerned 'what to teach' and 'how to teach.' The greatest discrepancy occurred with decisions about standardized testing policy, staff hiring, and budget development.

Further analysis of the data indicated that participation in decision making is multi-dimensional in nature. One dimension, associated technology, was related to students and teachers, but not to classroom activities. It included such decision areas as grading, student rights, and teacher performance evaluations. A second dimension, called the managerial dimension, concerned traditional management decisions, including budgeting, hiring, and scheduling. An instructional materials dimension was also found, and included decisions regarding textbooks and workbooks. The fourth dimension was the core technology dimension, which was related to decisions about what and how to teach, and teaching assignment.

The dimensions of participation were correlated with the subscales of the JDI. Satisfaction with present work was correlated most strongly with the managerial dimension. Satisfaction with promotion was most strongly related to the associated technology dimension. Satisfaction with coworkers was not related to any of the participation dimensions.

To explore the data further, schools in the sample were divided into a high participation group and low participation group based on teachers' responses to the decisional participation questionnaire. The two groups were compared to determine if the high participation group was statistically different from the low participation group on teachers' job satisfaction, teacher and student attendance, and student achievement and behavior. No significant differences were found on any of these variables.

The effect of teachers' participation in decision making was also assessed qualitatively using data from classroom observations and unstructured interviews with teachers (see Taylor & Teddlie, 1992, for a more thorough discussion). Again, comparisons were made between the two participation groups, however, there were no noteworthy differences in (a) the teaching strategies chosen, (b) the use of innovative approaches to student work such as cooperative learning, (c) the extent of teacher collaboration, (d) the content of the lessons taught, or (e) the physical arrangement of the classroom.

With regard to collaboration, teachers who were interviewed noted that faculty tend to work independently, although teachers in both participation groups indicated that there might be one or two grade levels, or a few teachers at a school who plan jointly. According to the teachers, they and their colleagues continued to work in isolation despite a district policy which released elementary students early one day each week to provide for two hours of professional time in addition to daily planning periods.

Consistently, the findings of this study did not match the rhetoric that ushered in the restructuring movement. More importantly, mounting results such as the ones just described may, as David (1991) cautions, mean that "restructuring will follow the well-worn path of failed reforms" (p. 12). Finding a way to make sense of such results is important if the restructuring movement is to succeed.

Considering the Empirical Findings in Terms of the Two Belief Systems

Educators and researchers alike must willing to re-analyze their beliefs about schools, teachers, and restructuring if the movement is to achieve success. The two belief systems described above provide a useful framework for thinking about change efforts. When the findings of the present study are reconsidered in light of these belief systems, the results become more understandable.

Evidence from this study suggests that the restructuring program in this district was rooted in the belief that strategic initiatives could accomplish genuine reform in schools and that the teacher-student interaction was not of paramount importance. Teachers were not as involved in decision making as they wanted to be, in part, because principals were reluctant to turn decisions over to teachers, particularly if the principals would be held accountable for the outcomes (Gomez, 1989). Accountability and making decisions go hand-in-hand, if the decision maker is believed to have the expert knowledge needed to make a sound decision. Framers of reform in this district apparently did not see teachers as experts, a opinion that colored implementation of the initiative.

Nevertheless, teachers were engaged in a degree of decision making and sat on committees that considered various problems. Through this work, teachers found some satisfaction, but these feelings were more strongly related to their involvement in decisions that were external to their work in the classroom.

Indeed, there is evidence that teacher felt their chances for promotion were less likely to come from their work with children than from their other activities. Hence, the notion being reinforced was the less one does with children, the more professional one's job is thought to be.

One interesting feature of the district's reform program was the integral involvement of the union in developing and implementing the reform agenda. This partnership between the central office and the union was intended as a move from a top-down to a more bottom-up orientation; and indeed, teachers did have a great deal of authority in developing the specific reform proposal for their school. However, training made available to the schools involved models of participation and methods of conflict resolution (Dreyfus, 1988; Gomez, 1989). There is no evidence that training touched on classroom activities or on enhancing teachers' skills in meeting the intellectual needs of the students. In fact, with regard to teachers' work in the classroom, observations in the schools found nothing particularly unique about those schools in which teachers enjoyed greater decisional participation. This finding, combined with teachers' acknowledgement that collegial planning was minimal, indicates that reforms molded through Belief System I fell short.

There appears to be a shared, but naive, belief among those involved with restructuring programs that if teachers are given the opportunity to work collaboratively, they will hasten to do just that. Belief System I does not acknowledge that collaboration "is

difficult for teachers who were trained to work self-sufficiently in isolated classrooms" (Payzant, 1989, p. 20). Collegiality does not come naturally in schools. There is a long history and normative culture that reinforces teachers' isolated autonomy within the walls of their classroom and that looks askance at teachers who admit difficulties and seek assistance. To overcome this history and culture, the limitations of 'self-sufficient isolation' must become part of the discussion, both among researchers, and, more importantly, among teachers and administrators. Not only is training necessary to reverse teachers' conditioned beliefs about seeking assistance, but encouragement and support is needed to nurture collaborative efforts. With regard to staff development, training in such areas as innovative pedagogy and curriculum development must not be overlooked. Were the focus of staff training to shift to these issues, the need for training in methods of conflict resolution may become unnecessary.

Considering the findings in terms of Belief System II, implementation of reform in this district actually disenfranchised teachers by diluting their focus on the classroom and siphoning away their attention and energy for managerial decisions. When teachers devote much time to after school meetings concerning non-teaching issues as often happens in restructuring programs, burnout rapidly ensues (Gomez, 1989). By failing to support the primacy of their work in the classroom, the reform program shortchanged both teachers and students. This was evident in the lack of effect

found with all of the variables explored in the study.

Belief System II suggests a radical restructuring of the restructuring agenda. Clune and White (1988) and others note that shared decision making plans often concentrate on personnel, budget, and curriculum. While there is nothing inherently wrong with these three items, the focus of decision making must be on curriculum and pedagogy if schools are to change. Decisions about personnel and budget should flow from decisions about curriculum and pedagogy, not be antecedent to them. As David (1991) notes, the primary question is "what do we want students to know and be able to do?" (p. 11); all other decisions should support the answer to this question.

The district studied did include the 'educational program' as a major part of the written agenda. But, an educational program, a Belief System I concern, is not the same thing as curriculum and pedagogy and an emphasis on the teacher-student interaction. Nothing in the classroom observations or teacher interviews indicated that what teachers and students did in schools was primarily important to the district's initiative. In fact, one teacher commented that teachers had not yet come to realize that they could use the reform program to alter what they did in behalf of student learning.

Conclusions

Writing in 1941 about the Hawthorne experiments, Roethlisberger observed

There seems to be an assumption today that we need a complex

> set of ideas to handle the complex problems of this complex world in which we live. We assume that a big problem needs a big idea; a complex problem needs a complex idea for its solution. As a result, our thinking tends to become more and more tortuous and muddled. (p. 7)

Nowhere is this more true than in the world of education and education reform.

The findings of this study indicate that elaborate reform programs with an attendant set of rules and regulations will fail if the simple is overlooked. The simple is that the purpose of schooling is to educate children, and that in schools, this charge is given to teachers. Nevertheless, reform agendas consistently overlook the importance of teachers' work <u>in</u> the classroom, concentrating instead on supposedly 'more professional' tasks <u>outside</u> the classroom. Considering the results of the study through the lens of Belief System II, the misplaced emphasis largely contributed to the failure of the program.

Belief System I and the accompanying strategic initiatives cannot force change in schools. Years of change efforts rooted in the first belief system have failed to produce the hoped for results. However, a word of caution is in order. There are few reform efforts which are grounded in Belief System II, and thus, as noted earlier, there is little evidence these reforms will have a greater chance of achieving the desired effect. Still, initiatives such as Accelerated Schools (Brandt, 1992) and the Coalition of Essential Schools (Sizer, 1986) provide sufficient cause for hope.

These programs and others like them encourage teacher inquiry about and discussion of their work in the classroom. Students' education and academic attainment is an integrated endeavor worthy of thoughtful deliberation and the coalesced efforts of teachers, parents, and others.

While the present authors argue that teachers' work with students must become the focus of reform, there is nonetheless an important role for central office to play. Reforms that are solely bottom-up have little more chance of success that those which are top-down (Bolman & Deal, 1988). However, a marriage of the two is essential for restructuring to succeed. Administrators, both in central office and in schools, have a more critical role to play than that involved in regulation and control. The importance of technical assistance, staff development responsive to identified needs within individual schools, and clear, on-going support for teachers in their efforts to enhance the educational experiences of students cannot be overstated. If the target of restructuring is improved student learning, all resources in a district must be directed toward achieving that goal.

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